

Incidents of Prison Life in 1862 (pt. 3)

E. M. Van Duzee

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.

Recommended Citation

The Annals of Iowa, 6(3) (Jul. 1868): 220-233

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

INCIDENTS OF PRISON LIFE IN 1862.

BY E. M. VAN DUZEE,

LATE MAJOR OF TWELFTH IOWA INFANTRY.

(Concluded from page 92.)

I promised in the last number, that I would give a brief account of the steps taken by the three commissioners sent from Selma to effect an exchange of the Shiloh prisoners, and promote the execution of a cartel for general exchange of prisoners held on both sides. I have sought information of the facts connected with this subject, from the only source open to me, and have been unable to obtain it; and I can therefore only say, that upon their arrival in Washington, the commissioners were admitted to an interview with President Lincoln, to whom they stated the object of their mission, and from whom they received expressions of great personal interest and sympathy, and assurances that all would be done in the premises that might consist with the interests of the Government. So far as immediate results were concerned, however, the commissioners were unsuccessful, though their statements concerning the treatment of prisoners in rebel hands had great influence in promoting the execution of the cartel entered into shortly afterwards, under whose provisions thousands of sufferers were released and lives saved. The conditions of their parole required their immediate return within rebel lines; but through the influence of friends, and correspondence with the Richmond authorities, two of the commissioners (Col. Miller and Maj. Stone) secured their own exchange, while Capt. Gregg returned to us at Madison, Ga., the bearer of letters from home, money, and much-needed supplies of clothing; the President having ordered one month's pay of each officer of our party to be delivered to Capt. Gregg, and he using a wise discretion in the purchase of such articles as he knew were most needful for our comfort. A portion of the money we received was in "greenbacks," and the rest in coin; and each prisoner at once became a broker. Yankee shrewdness was stimulated and emboldened by necessity, and

in our guards we found not unwilling customers for our gold and greenbacks, who gave four dollars in Confederate money for one of the former, and two for one of the latter. This fact illustrates the confidence the rebel soldier felt in the old Government after a year of war, and his lack of faith in the confederate cause. The gold and greenbacks thus obtained were no doubt hoarded against the coming time, looked for, though unacknowledged, by the mass of Southerners, when the rebellion and its monetary and other expedients would be things of the past, and valuable only as warnings for the future.

We continued at Selma nearly two months, and about the middle of June embarked on the steamer "Beulah," a regular packet plying between Mobile and Montgomery, and early the next morning arrived at the latter place. The boat was well filled with passengers, mostly women and childred and their colored nurses. We were allowed the freedom of the boat, and took our meals at the second table. We expected to meet at Montgomery our comrades, from whom we had separated a few weeks before at Selma; but in this we were disappointed, for they had been removed to Macon, Ga., a few days previous to our arrival—except a few who remained in hospital too ill to be removed. A small delegation from our party was permitted to visit the hospital where they were confined, and a sad report they brought back to us of the pitiable plight in which they found them; mere skeletons, their physical, and in some cases mental, constitutions wrecked; in the midst of filth, with vermin crawling upon their cots and on the floor; the weak-minded chattering of home and dear ones, and the stronger only less hopeful as they were more conscious of their desperate helplessness; all going down to their death with such certainty as neglect on the part of surgeons, utter destitution of needful medicine and nourishing food, combined with radical demoralization of the moral forces, could hasten them. What a standard do such scenes afford by which to measure the men responsible for such things, and the social state which makes them possible! The chivalric Southerner—boasting of a superior culture and refinement, of

those generous characteristics that are supposed to distinguish the wealthy, and, in the midst of a servile population, the ruling class—yet so devoid of that benevolence and magnanimity inseparable from true culture and refinement, that he can look upon the sufferings of a fellow man within his power, and with pitiless cruelty bid him suffer on, refusing to bring to his relief the means of comfort or recovery, which official position could command, and humane impulses, to say nothing of professional skill, suggest.

After a day and night in Montgomery, we were taken to Atlanta, Ga., where we were quartered for one night in a public hall, and were then taken to the City Hall building, and quartered in the City Council room. We were here joined by about half a dozen naval officers, who had been captured off Mobile Bay.

On two or three occasions during the week we were here, ladies residing in the city called upon us, but were not permitted to enter the room. They inquired into our situation, and expressed desires to alleviate the rigors of our confinement by furnishing us with anything that might be needful therefor; but beyond a few books which they kindly sent us, nothing was permitted to enter the building from such a source. The officers in charge of the prison expressed dissatisfaction at the manifestation of a disposition to serve us.

One day we observed, passing along the street in front of our prison, a wagon in which were seated two soldiers dressed in blue, strongly guarded by rebel soldiers and followed by a large crowd of people. Upon inquiry we learned that the soldiers in the wagon were two of a party of raiders that had been captured within the rebel lines in East Tennessee, destroying railroads and bridges. They had been tried by military commission, condemned to death, and were now on the way to the gibbet. We were not able to learn their names, but a most horrible account of their execution was given to us on the next day.

After a week's sojourn in Atlanta, we were removed to Madison, Ga., a small village about midway between Atlanta

and Augusta. Our detention at Atlanta was caused by the fact that our prison at Madison had not been completed. A three-story building, which in better times had been used as a cotton manufactory, situated near the railroad on the outskirts of the village, had been prepared for our reception. Its condition upon our arrival was filthy in the extreme. The floors were covered with a thick coating of oil, and such dirt as will accumulate in a building used for the purpose to which this had been devoted. In the lower story we found a large number of East Tennesseans—political prisoners. Insufficient food, over-work, and ill treatment, had reduced them to a condition wretched beyond description. Malice had free play at the South in the treatment of this class of prisoners—a Southern loyalist being regarded as deserving of even severer punishment than a Northern Yankee. In this school of hate were prison-keepers tutored from the very outbreak of the rebellion until they reached that deadly proficiency that reduced their conduct to a policy of indiscriminate murder by starvation and all the means that satanic wickedness could devise. Our Tennessee friends hailed our arrival with unbounded delight, as the harbinger of a milder regimen for themselves, and their hopes were realized; they still remained prisoners when we were forwarded for exchange some months later, and nothing is known of their subsequent fate. We were quartered in the third story; we ranged ourselves by messes around the room, which was about eighty feet in length by fifty in breadth. From some loose lumber on the premises we constructed rude tables and benches, and a few were fortunate enough to secure a sufficient quantity of material to construct bunks. While at Atlanta we had been supplied with cotton mattresses, one for each two prisoners. We remonstrated with Captain Calhoun, commander of the post, upon the filthy condition of the floors, and were informed that we would be permitted to remove the filth if *we* saw fit; but he finally yielded to our persistent demands, and sent a squad of colored men, with lime-water, brooms and scrubbing-brushes, to cleanse the floor. A thorough daily sweeping,

which we submitted to perform, taking turns by messes, kept the room in a passable condition of cleanliness.

A board fence about fifteen feet high extended around the building, about fifty feet distant. The building fronted towards the north. The main entrance to the enclosure was on the eastern side, near the front. Opposite was a gate, which communicated with an open shed, where the cooking was performed by a colored cook. Our food was of the most unpalatable kind—rancid bacon, rice cooked without salt, bread that extreme hunger alone could drive us to eat—and very short rations at that. After the return of Capt. Gregg from Washington, we supplied ourselves almost entirely, being allowed to draw very scant rations of rice and bacon, and hiring our food cooked. Hucksters were permitted to come to the main entrance, and we purchased regularly from them such articles as we needed. Peaches, of a very poor quality, were abundant in August; and later, sweet potatoes formed the staple of our diet.

As the Fourth of July approached, the idea of having a celebration was suggested, and we at once set to work to prepare for exercises appropriate to such an occasion. We were obliged to omit from our programme the national salute, but fully elaborated the other features. Our singers rehearsed all the familiar patriotic songs, the various officers were appointed, regular toasts prepared, and our little community looked forward with as much eagerness as is usually manifested, for the great national anniversary to arrive. In the midst of our preparations, our thoughts turned towards the North, where we knew similar preparations were going forward in every village and hamlet, where gratitude for the birth, and hopes for the preservation of the nation, were still cherished.

At 9 o'clock on the morning of the 4th, order was commanded by Gen. Prentiss, President of the day. The prisoners seated themselves at the south end of the room, around a platform that had been constructed out of benches and tables, the choir to the right and a little in advance of the platform. The President then announced that the exercises would commence

with a prayer by Lient. Stokes of the 18th Wisconsin Infantry, a line officer who had also served his regiment in the capacity of chaplain, a man of godly temper and sterling mould. The Lieutenant addressed a fervent, thrilling petition to the God of men and nations, the God of the prisoner and of them that go free, in which every heart seemed reverently to join. Then followed "The Star-spangled Banner," all the prisoners being requested to join in the chorus. We sang with a will; our hearts were in the song, and our love for the dear old flag gushed forth with such an energy of enthusiasm as is seldom witnessed except in the flush of victory on the field. The grand old song was borne along full and clear, through the open windows of our prison, and through the village to the post commander's headquarters; and that officer straightway took up the line of march to see what it all meant. Could it be possible that those Yankees had the dare-devil audacity to flaunt their love for the old banner and the Government it symbolizes, in the official ears of a scion of the arch nullifier? Presently the Captain appeared in our midst. In the meantime Capt. Haddock, of the 12th Iowa Infantry, Orator of the day, had commenced his oration in a mild and inoffensive strain, with only such general utterances as even Capt. Calhoun could not except to. When Capt. Haddock concluded, the first regular toast—Our Country—was given, and Lieut.-Col. Pratt, of the 18th Missouri Infantry, was called upon to respond. The sentiment afforded admirable scope for just the kind of talent Col. Pratt possessed. A man of fine education, thoroughly conversant with the history of the country and its varied resources, and possessing an unbounded faith in its high destiny, he brought into play the most powerful logic; reviewed the political history of the nation, in a brief and rapid analysis of the leading events that had finally culminated in civil war; and poured forth upon the wicked concoctors of the rebellion a perfect tornado of invective. The Colonel concluded his speech, and was greeted, as he resumed his seat, with the enthusiastic applause of his fellow prisoners. Capt. Calhoun was livid with rage; and as soon as the outburst of applause

had subsided, he marched up to Gen. Prentiss, and said: "I consider these proceedings, sir, derogatory to the dignity and character of my Government—and I order them stopped." The General coolly repeated the Captain's order to the audience, and added, while yet that officer stood within a few feet of him: "We will conclude the exercises of this occasion, by singing 'Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean.' All who desire to participate in singing, will please gather around this platform." There was a general rush for the President's stand, and we made the welkin ring again with "Three cheers for the Red, White and Blue!" Thus ended our Fourth of July celebration, in a rebel prison, in the heart of the Confederacy, in 1862.

During this month we received large accessions to our numbers. The second floor of the building was filled to its utmost capacity, and all the spare room on our own floor was occupied. The first of these arrivals consisted of Gen. T. T. Crittenden, and the officers of the 3d Minnesota Infantry, who had been captured at or near Murfreesboro, Tenn; and, later, the remnant of our old comrades from Macon, that had survived the rigors to which rebel hate had subjected them, joined us. The joy of this reunion was mixed with sorrow, as we inquired for one and another of our old friends, and were told they had laid down their lives in the foul prison pens to which the hellish barbarism of their keepers had consigned them. This inhuman phase of rebel savagery, which no language can properly characterize, has been often dwelt upon, and I drop it without further remark.

Our means of diversion at Madison were similar to those at Selma. The noble game of chess held an important place among our amusements. Col. Pratt was champion of the third floor, and Gen. Crittenden of the second floor; and many were the contests in which they engaged, the adherents of either champion taking as lively an interest as though a Paulsen and a Morphy were contesting for the championship of a continent. Col. Pratt very kindly instructed those who desired to learn the game, and quite a number became skill-

ful players. This was not the only way in which the Colonel rendered excellent service to his fellow prisoners. He was a fine elocutionist, and having obtained a copy of Shakespeare, he would assemble those who desired to listen, in some shady corner of the enclosure, as far away as our contracted limits would allow from the bustle of the crowd, and read the productions of the great dramatist. These seasons of intellectual enjoyment were greatly prized, and were productive of great benefit to those who participated in them.

The roll was called every morning. During the day we had the freedom of the enclosure, and at sunset we were warned into the building. No restraints were imposed upon our intercourse with each other. The health of the original Selma party continued excellent throughout the summer; Lieut.-Col. Ferguson, of the 8th Iowa Infantry, was the only officer of that party that was seriously ill. The causes to which such a remarkable escape from diseases, which are almost inseparable from the kind of life we were leading, were due, have been alluded to before. We did not suffer the hardships of our situation to depress our spirits. I do not mean to be understood that we were content to be "prisoners of war." We chafed over the delay, unnecessary as we thought, in bringing about an exchange; but we were powerless to accomplish our own release, and the most prudent thing under the circumstances was to make the best of our hard lot. The feasibility of escaping was frequently discussed; and, once at least, a scheme for a general outbreak was nearly matured, but fell through because a few who did not believe in its practicability, and would not run the risk upon the judgment of a majority, would not co-operate. Looking back now upon the proposed escapade, I must confess its opponents had most of wise prudence upon their sides. But the failure of a combined movement did not discourage smaller parties from making the attempt to escape—not by force, but by strategem.

There was a singular coincidence in the plans of two of these parties, who acted entirely without concert, in fact with no suspicions of each other's intentions. One party consisted of

Gen. Prentiss, Col. J. L. Geddes and Capt. Geddes of the 8th Iowa, Major Ward of 38th Indiana Infantry, Lieut. Michel of Missouri, Lieut. Van Brunt of Michigan, and an East Tennessean who was familiar with the mountain roads of Northern Georgia and East Tennessee, by the name of Estes. The other party was composed of Capts. W. C. Earle and W. W. Warner (whose attempted escape from Selma was mentioned in the last number), and the writer, all of the 12th Iowa Infantry. I can give an account of the plans of the latter party only. We had borrowed a township map of the State of Georgia, from one of the prisoners who had joined us from Macon. He had received it from a relative, who had called upon him there, and who was compiler of a gazetteer of the State, to which the map was attached. This map contained all the roads in the State, and from it we made a tracing of the region lying directly north from Madison, through which we intended to make our way after getting out of the prison enclosure. The ground on which the prison stood sloped to the rear, and across the south end, in the basement, was an engine room in which the engine was still standing. A one-story addition projected from the south-western corner, some eighteen or twenty feet from the main building, and a door opened out towards the south-west angle of the enclosure. An abrupt depression at this corner of the enclosure had served as an outlét for the water, after heavy rains, and the soil had become so washed away from the base board of the fence as to expose it in its whole length. It was our purpose to conceal ourselves before sunset beneath the building (not in the engine-room, but under the main part), and towards midnight make our way into the engine-room, thence one of our number would crawl out of the door in the L part above described, and down into the depression in the south-west corner, and with an iron bar we had provided for the occasion, wrench off the base board of the fence. At a given signal the others were to cautiously crawl down into the corner and through the opening thus made. After effecting our exit, it was our purpose to travel as rapidly as possible, guided by our map, in a north-

ern direction into the mountains of Northern Georgia, pass into South Carolina through Rabun's Gap; thence make our way into East Tennessee, and thence by way of the valley of the Clinch River into South-west Virginia; thence cross over into the valley of the Big Sandy River, and down the course of that stream to the Ohio. I will not go into an argument to prove the practicability of this route, for it would be uninteresting, and probably inconclusive. The first requisite prescribed in the celebrated rule for cooking a hare is to "catch the hare;" so, to commend my views relative to the feasibility of the project I have described, it would be necessary that the first step should be successful, namely, to get out of prison, which, I am sorry to say, we failed to do. And this is how it happened: The other party had fixed upon the same night for making their attempt at escape, and the preliminary steps in their plan was the same as ours; and consequently when, as the signal for retiring into the building was given by the officer of the guard, on the evening of September 14, 1862, ten persons—the number of both parties—had concealed themselves in the dark and shallow space in the foundation of the main building, neither party knowing of the presence of the other until some time had elapsed. When that fact transpired, a conference was held, and it was concluded that, as our party was smallest, we should make the attempt according to our own plan, at as early an hour as was deemed safe; and if we were successful, the other party would avail themselves of the breach we had made, and after we were outside we would hold further conference with respect to future movements.

At night there were four sentinels around the building, whose beats were, respectively, along the fence (inside) at the sides and ends of the enclosure; so that, in reaching the fence at any point, it was necessary to cross a sentinel's beat. We (our party of three) made our way from our place of concealment into the L at the south-west corner of the building. Capt. Warner had volunteered to make the attempt to open the breach; and, provided with the iron bar, he crawled along

close to the ground, down into the corner; while Capt. Earle and myself, just within the door, almost breathlessly awaited the signal agreed upon. The tramp of the two sentinels whose beats intersected within a few feet of our position, as they approached each other, would warn Capt. W. to desist until they had again retreated. Alas! the best laid plans will sometimes miscarry. Some evil spirit, either of drowsiness or laziness, entered into the sentinel who paced along the end of the enclosure, and he seated himself about midway of his beat, upon a log, and leaned back against the fence, thus bringing himself in contact with an excellent conductor of sound. Another evil spirit, probably in collusion with the former, entered into a nail that fastened the board at which Captain Warner was at work; and, as rusty, spirit-possessed nails sometimes will do, as the Captain gave a wrench which he thought would finally detach the board, it "squeaked" audibly—so audibly that the drowsy sentinel heard the sound thereof, and hastened towards the corner, giving the alarm to the other sentinel. It was very dark, and they could distinguish nothing upon the ground; and after conferring a moment together, standing not above three feet from Capt. Earle and myself, who were hugging the floor just within the door of the engine room, they seemed to conclude that it was a false alarm, and were about to resume their beats, when one said: "I am bound to see if there is anything down in that there hole;" and, with his bayonet close to the ground, he went poking down into the dark corner where Capt. Warner was lying, strained and contracted into as small proportions as the fact of physical existence would admit. But he could not make himself so small that the point of a bayonet could not find him; and so when he realized the contact of cold steel with his person, he surrendered at discretion. Straightway there were vociferous calls for the Corporal and Sergeant of the guard, and Captain Warner was conducted to the entrance of the building. Capt. Earle and myself were unable to move from our position, for the sentinels were standing within a few feet of us; when the Sergeant returned with a lantern, and, after going down into

the corner to see what ravages Capt. Warner had committed, and repairing them, he returned and questioned the sentinels about the matter. It was suggested that the Captain might have had accomplices, and at this the Sergeant said he would search the engine room, and see if some one might not be concealed therein. He swung his lantern into the doorway, and, behold! the prostrate forms of two valiant Yankees! Of course we surrendered without asking for terms, and were marched up to take position beside Capt. Warner, who was still detained at the entrance. By this time the Lieutenant of the guard had got upon the ground. He questioned us as to whether there were others acting in concert with us, and we truthfully answered him in the negative. But he concluded to look and see for himself, and instituted a thorough search, which resulted in unearthing the other party. We were now all sent to our quarters, the guards around the prison were doubled, roll call was ordered, to see if any one was missing, and we retired to our couches, hoping no further notice would be taken of the matter, and half dreading the uncertain fate that might await us in the morning. Everything passed as usual until an hour or two after roll call on the following morning; when Capt. Calhoun ordered all prisoners who were detected in the attempt to escape the previous evening, to fall into line. We gathered up our effects and obeyed the command, and were marched out of the building. At the door a squad of soldiers, numbering about twenty, were drawn up with open ranks to receive us. Under this escort we were marched through the village and lodged in the county jail. The room in which we were confined was about fifteen feet square. It was lighted by two heavily grated windows, each about eighteen inches square. There was no ventilation, and scarcely light enough to distinguish each other across the room. The air was deathly when we first entered; what must it become with ten occupants? The heavy door was bolted upon us; our time of sorest trial had come, and hour by hour the confinement in this dark, dismal, deathly place, told upon us. Major Ward, of Indiana, sank rapidly from

robust health to such weakness that on the evening of the 17th, he had to be carried back to the prison. At the end of three days the post Surgeon advised Capt. Calhoun to remove us, or the consequences would prove fatal. Accordingly, on Friday evening, we were taken back to the cotton factory, and placed in close confinement in a room at the rear of the second story, where we remained until forwarded to Richmond. Here we had an abundance of light, air, and amusement. Under the direction of Col. Geddes, we engaged in various gymnastic and sword exercises; played chess and chequers, and diverted ourselves with our guards, two of whom were constantly in the room with us. Col. Geddes covered the walls of our room with pictures drawn with charcoal, and our guards conceived and expressed the most flattering encomiums upon his artistic ability; and each day, by special permission of the officer on duty, the soldiers off duty would be admitted, one or two at a time, and request to be shown around the room by Lieut. Van Brunt, who acted in the capacity of showman, and, in a manner entirely his own, and utterly indescribable, the Lieutenant would enter into the most elaborate criticisms of the various "works of art," greatly to our amusement, and to the most solemn edification of the spectators.

Meanwhile the prisoners in the other parts of the building were passing their time in the usual way, and our monotonous experiences continued until, during the night of the 6th Oct., they were most joyfully interrupted by the welcome tidings that upon the next morning we would be forwarded to Richmond, with all practicable dispatch, for parole.

And so, just six months from the day of our capture at Pittsburg Landing, Tenn., we embarked at Madison, Ga., for "*home*." I should entirely fail, did I attempt to describe our feelings as we journeyed on, each hour taking us nearer to our own loved ones. My readers, many of whom have no doubt experienced the same feelings, or in their households or neighborhoods have some living witness of the horrors of rebel "prison pens;" the miracle of escape from them alive;

the joy of once more beholding the beloved banner under whose folds, bravely battling for home and country, he was finally compelled to yield himself to the power of his enemy; and the solemn, thankful gratitude with which he folds in the embrace of his love those who are dearer than his own life; will need no such tame description as the most gifted pen could only give.

We arrived in Richmond on the 12th, spent one night in the famous Libby Prison, and on the 13th of October, 1862, were paroled and delivered on board the United States truce boat, at Aiken's Landing, on James River.

I have thus given, *entirely from memory*, such a sketch as I was able, of the principal incidents of our prison life in 1862—six years ago. I have undoubtedly omitted many things that would have interested some of my readers; and I have enlarged upon others which, perhaps, possess but little interest for the general reader. I have written at all, only because I thought some memorial, however slight and feebly executed, should preserve the remembrance of this otherwise blank period in the history of a portion of Iowa's gallant heroes. I am sorry the task has been so illy performed, and crave the considerate indulgence of my readers, and especially of my former prison associates, in consideration of the motive that has prompted me.

BRIGADIER-GENERAL JAMES M. TUTTLE.

We publish in this number the picture of General Tuttle, a very fine steel engraving, by Buttre, of New York. The following *facts* of his life we have gathered from several reliable sources.

James Madison Tuttle is a native of Ohio; was born on the 24th of September, 1823, near Summerfield, in Monroe county. His father emigrated to Fayette County, Indiana, when James was ten years of age. Here he remained until grown to the years of maturity. His opportunities for education were the Common Schools. Soon after arriving at his majority he came to Iowa, and located at Farmington, Van Buren County, where he engaged in mercantile pursuits. His capacity as a

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.